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The apocalyptic fantasy inspired by Jerusalem

by John Olinger

JERUSALEM, JERUSALEM: HOW THE ANCIENT CITY IGNITED OUR MODERN WORLD

By James Carroll

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If a book can have a soundtrack, then James Carroll's *Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How the Ancient City Ignited Our Modern World* calls for Leonard Cohen's "Story of Isaac," a lament for youth sacrificed on the altars of parents' visions and a cry against the war on Vietnam.

Carroll, son of a U.S. Air Force officer and himself a former priest, has written an extended meditation on violence and religion, rooted in the hallowed ground of Jerusalem, sacred to the three Abrahamic faiths.

Through five millennia, Carroll follows a tortured path that ends in a city shaped by belief and divided between two communities. The title, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem*, reflects a series of dualities -- earthly and heavenly, mundane and imagined, Christian and Jewish, European and Islamic, City on the Hill and Messiah Nation -- that are entwined in what Carroll calls a "lethal feedback loop between the actual city of Jerusalem and the apocalyptic fantasy it inspires."

Throughout this nuanced work, in which the copious endnotes are every bit as rewarding as the text, Carroll weaves history, anthropology, theology and philosophy in an attempt to understand the choices, conscious and unconscious, that brought us to the current bloody impasse. Carroll draws heavily on the work of René Girard and his concept of mimetic rivalry -- "the inbuilt inclination of humans to want what other humans want" -- to pull the threads together and locate Jerusalem as the place where three faiths underwent critical transformations.

Girard argues that in prehistoric societies, human sacrifice arose as the "antidote to a terrible escalation of violence based on rivalry and theft." A marginal character is isolated and scapegoated and bears the blame

for the discord. In the process, the victim, whose sacrifice has restored order, is honored and becomes divine. And in the story of Abraham and Isaac, the sacrificial victim is replaced by a ram. And the place of this divine intervention is Mount Moriah, soon to become Mount Zion, finally to become the Temple Mount.



Jerusalem is first and foremost a place of sacrifice, but it is also a

place of transition and dislocation. The first temple, destroyed in the Babylonian exile, was rebuilt but without the Ark of the Covenant. God resident in the Holy of Holies in the first temple became God absent in the second. God was present in his absence. When the Romans destroyed the second temple, they banished the Jews from Jerusalem. The Jewish people now became present in their absence.

The Gospels, written in these early days of the Jewish community's dislocation, are the site of Carroll's next transformation. Carroll argues that Jesus lived in the context of Jewish resistance to Roman rule. Rome was the other, the enemy. But the Gospels were composed in a time when the Christian community grew up far from Jerusalem, during the time following Nero's persecution and the Roman destruction of the Temple. The authors of the Gospels, Carroll writes, feared portraying Rome as the enemy and thus focused on the Jews of Jerusalem and their rejection of Jesus. Thus the temple story became the story of the Jewish rejection of Jesus.

The early church, increasingly wed to Rome, was alienated from its own Jewish roots and the biblical mode of self-criticism, embodied in the prophetic tradition. In the prophetic tradition, Israel took its troubles as a spur to self-examination of the ways in which Israel had proven itself unworthy of God's covenant. Christianity fell prey, through its scapegoating of the Jews, to a more human instinct: to seek external causes for its troubles. Self-criticism became self-justification.

Augustine crystallizes this movement when he sees the Roman destruction of Jerusalem not in a prophetic sense but in an apocalyptic one, as punishment for the Jewish people's rejection of Jesus, not as God's purifying the Jewish people. A replacement theology was born in which the Jewish people forfeited their right to live in Jerusalem when they broke the covenant by rejecting Jesus.

Carroll notes that whenever Christians ruled the city, Jews were forbidden to live in Jerusalem. Indeed, Carroll recounts the meeting of the Zionist founder Theodor Herzl with Pius X in 1904, during which Herzl hoped to gain the pope's support for the Zionist enterprise. Pius demurred, saying, "The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people." Pius continued: "I know it is disagreeable to see the Turks in possession of our holy places. We simply have to put up with it. But to sanction the Jewish wish to occupy these sites, that we cannot do."

There is a certain irony here, for during the "Turkish" occupation, Jews were free to live and worship in Jerusalem, as were Christians. Not that Carroll is starry-eyed when it comes to Islam, but in the grand scheme of things, it is very nearly a bystander in the larger drama of the heavenly city.

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Carroll's excavation of Jerusalem carries him to distant places: to Poitiers in the eighth century, to 17th-century Massachusetts and Rhode Island, to the Great Awakening of the 18th century and to evangelical Protestantism in the 19th and 20th centuries. He notes the dichotomy in end-time theology between ancient Catholic and Orthodox Christianity and modern evangelical Protestantism. The former believed God forbade the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem, the latter that God wants them to return. Catholics see the return at the end of the world, evangelicals as the precondition, but both, Carroll wryly notes, see the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem as the creation of the heavenly Jerusalem.

What began as a place of sacrifice in which God tested Abraham and finally stayed his hand has become, through the centuries, a place where from Masada onwards, parents have been willing to sacrifice their sons -- and daughters -- in the name of God. Religion and violence feed each other in this otherwise holy place.

Carroll ends on a hopeful note by laying out five principles of what he calls good religion: that it celebrate life, not death; that it recognize God's oneness as unity and love; that it be concerned with revelation, not salvation; that it not be coercive; and that it paradoxically be secular, not tradition-bound. Still, hopeful as Carroll may be in the end, Leonard Cohen comes singing through it all:

You who build these altars now
to sacrifice these children,
you must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision
and you never have been tempted
by a demon or a god.

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